

Maurice Hinchey NEWS

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HINCHEY CALLS FOR FUNDING TO PROTECT PUBLIC LANDS

WASHINGTON - U.S. Representative Maurice Hinchey (NY-26) today called on President Bush and Congress to provide funding to adequately protect America's wildlife and public lands. Hinchey, along with U.S. Representatives Nick Rahall (WV-03) and Norman Dicks (WA-06), and members of the environmental community, released a report detailing funding shortfalls in the president's budget for fiscal year 2003.

Hinchey made the following remarks:

"The Bush Administration's budget fails to protect America's natural heritage. Regrettably, this is a budget of ill-advised proposals that under-funds the stewardship of our public lands and wildlife at a time when our natural resources have serious needs. Foremost among the administration's skewed budget priorities is its emphasis on resource exploitation versus preservation. While the budget proposes increased funding to speed up energy development on BLM lands and to remove barriers to energy production, it pays lip service to protecting some of our most wild and pristine public lands from degradation.

"Americans are increasingly turning to BLM lands for recreational opportunities. Increased visitation, particularly the growing use of motorized off-road vehicles, is adversely impacting the health of these lands and the wildlife that depend on them. Unfortunately, the Bush Administration's budget would exacerbate these problems by cutting basic environmental protection programs on BLM lands for threatened and endangered species protection, watershed improvement, recreational use, and protecting historical and cultural resources.

"When it comes to protecting and managing the newest crown jewels in our National Monument system, the Bush Administration once again prioritizes the exploitation of our public lands. Of the \$14 million increase for BLM land use planning, approximately half is being targeted for plans that will support increases in oil and gas production. Meanwhile, the \$2 million increase that is proposed for the National Landscape Conservation System that administers our National Monuments is entirely inadequate for the task of protecting our 19 newest national monuments.

"This budget breaks the administration's campaign promise to fully fund the Land and Water Conservation Fund (LWCF). The administration falsely takes credit for funding LWCF when it's actually trying to undermine it. This is a new version of the same shell game that didn't pass the laugh test with the Interior Appropriations subcommittee last year. The illusion of full

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funding in the administration's budget is created by shifting existing accounts from the Fish and Wildlife Service and the National Forest Service - existing programs that have never been part of LWCF - into LWCF, and calling LWCF fully funded when it's actually a net decrease.

"The administration takes credit for fully funding LWCF at \$911 million, but in fact the program is actually funded at approximately \$486 million. Federal land acquisition is reduced by \$94 million or 22 percent below the FY02 level.

"The National Wildlife Refuge System is celebrating its 100th anniversary next year and the Administration has recommended an 18 percent increase of \$56 million - an important increase. Unfortunately, nearly half of the funding for this increase is being diverted from the Fish and Wildlife Service's land acquisition account, further eroding our ability to protect important lands, and robbing acquisition for maintenance and operations. Land acquisition is just as important as operations and maintenance for the Refuge System to meet its conservation mission. In order to improve ecosystem health, ecologically sensitive lands must be acquired.

"The administration has requested level funding for the core endangered species program, which is entirely inadequate. Last year that the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service stated that it would need approximately \$120 million to address the current backlog of more than 250 imperiled species awaiting listing determinations under the ESA, and the several hundred listed species awaiting critical habitat. Due to inadequate funding for the ESA recovery program, a number of species on the list continue to decline, even though they are currently protected under the ESA. At least 40 currently listed species could become extinct in the near future even though protected because there is not enough funding for needed recovery actions. We cannot allow species to reach the brink of extinction due to misplaced budget priorities.

"Given that the Bush Administration's budget fails to meet many of the most pressing needs on our public lands it will be up to Congress to enact an Interior Appropriations bill that invests in our natural heritage. As a member of the Interior Appropriations subcommittee, I am committed to fighting for funding to protect our most treasured natural assets."